

ADE DAILY NEWS CLIPS

March 15, 2013

Two bow out of supt. contention (Ashley News Observer)

The search for a new superintendent for the Crossett School District took an unexpected turn last week when two candidates removed their names from consideration.

The school board had planned to meet March 4 to make its final deliberations and to announce their chosen candidate for the position, but the meeting instead was canceled.

Interim superintendent Tommy Tyler said two of the four finalists, Jonesboro assistant superintendent Sue Castleberry and Danny Brackett, principal of Har-Ber High School in Springdale, withdrew their names from consideration "at the last minute," forcing the board to cancel the meeting.

Castleberry and Brackett were among four chosen by the board for interviews from a field of some 18 applicants for the superintendent's position.

The board decided at its Monday night meeting to invite Barbara Woods, currently interim superintendent of the Waldron School District, to interview for the Crossett position today (Wednesday).

Tyler said Woods had retired after more than 40 years of experience, although she came out of retirement to accept the post in Waldron.

He said her professional experience includes stints as superintendent at both the McGehee and Lake Hamilton school districts.

"She has some family background that goes back to Crossett," Tyler said of Woods. "I think she wants to come back to southeast Arkansas."

UPDATE 3/15: The board met Wednesday night to interview Barbara Woods, who had met with the faculty-community screening committee earlier in the day.

Interim superintendent Tommy Tyler said the board made no decision following the interview.

He said the board plans to meet next week to again deliberate on a choice for a new superintendent, and possibly review new applications, should any be received over the next week.

The board could meet again the last week of March to announce a decision, Tyler said.

"They're just considering all the options," he said.

Bill to give districts more time to fix fiscal woes passes House (Log Cabin Democrat, Conway)

LITTLE ROCK — The House advanced bills Thursday that would give fiscally distressed school districts more time to get their financial houses in order and would create a new state panel to decide the fate of charter schools.

The Senate rejected legislation that would make Arkansas law mirror federal law in penalties regarding lead-based paint.

The House voted 89-1 to pass House Bill 1770 by Rep. Mark Perry, D-Jacksonville. The bill would change the maximum amount of time that a school or school district can be in fiscal distress, academic distress or facilities distress from two years to five years.

“It gives them up to five years, and actually puts some language in there that will allow some advisory boards, once progress is being made after two years, where those advisory boards can come on and ... help them,” Perry said.

A school or district that does not get out of distress within five years would be consolidated, annexed or reconstituted, which is currently the fate of districts that do not get out of distress within two years. The bill is supported by the state Department of Education.

The House voted 87-0 to pass HB 1528 by Rep. Biviano, R-Searcy. The bill would authorize the state education commissioner to appoint five to 11 Education Department employees to a panel that would review and decide on charter school applications and renewals. A decision by the panel could be appealed to the state Board of Education, which now approves or disapproves charter school applications.

The Education Department supports the bill. Education officials opposed an earlier bill that Biviano scrapped that would have created an independent commission to approve and regulate charter schools.

HB 1770 and HB 1528 now go to the Senate.

Other bills passed by the House on Thursday included:

- HB 1702 by Rep. Joannathan Barnett, R-Siloam Springs, which would extend for 10 years a law allowing the state Highway Commission to enter into design-build contracts, in which a contractor is responsible for both designing and constructing a project. The current law expires in July. The bill also would expand the types of project for which design-build contracts can be issued.

The bill passed 66-16 and goes to the Senate.

- HB 2049 by Rep. Jeff Wardlaw, D-Warren, which would eliminate the requirement that massage therapy school students be tested for tuberculosis. Wardlaw said the tests are not particularly useful because they are only done once, not annually, and the state no longer has federal dollars to pay for the tests, so the cost has been shifted to the students.

The bill passed 84-3 and goes to the Senate.

- HB 1686 by Rep. Richard Womack, R-Arkadelphia, which would allow criminal background checks and Child Maltreatment Central Registry checks of volunteers at public schools. The bill passed 88-0 and goes to the Senate.

- HB 1282 by Rep. John Edwards, D-Little Rock. Under the bill, if the Arkansas Highway and Transportation Department seeks to obtain a private property owner's land under the right of eminent domain and the property owner files a legal challenge and wins by 10 percent or more, the state must pay the property owner's legal costs. The bill passed 77-7 and goes to the Senate.

- HB 1354 by Rep. David Branscum, R-Marshall, which would define an "infamous crime" — an offense which would disqualify a person from running for or holding public office — as a misdemeanor theft or property offense; abuse of office; tampering; or a misdemeanor involving deceit, fraud or a false statement. Felonies already prohibit people from running for or holding public office in Arkansas.

The bill passed 93-0 and goes to the Senate.

- Senate Bill 654 by Sen. Jon Woods, R-Springdale, which would end mandatory testing of prison inmates for HIV before their release into society. Presenting the bill in the House, Rep. Justin Harris, R-West Fork, said only three inmates have tested positive for HIV since the tests became mandatory in 2007 and that the bill would save the state \$100,000 a year.

The bill passed 81-0 and goes to the Senate.

The Senate on Thursday rejected HB 1355 by Rep. Butch Wilkins, D-Bono, in a 13-12 vote. A bill needs 18 votes in the 35-member Senate to pass.

The bill would align the state's penalties related to violations of lead-based paint rules with those required by federal law. The vote occurred after Sen. Alan Clark, R-Lonsdale, told Sen. Keith Ingram, D-West Memphis, who presented the bill on the Senate floor, that he believed the legislation would cause costs for house builders and others to rise.

The Senate passed:

- SB 778 by Sen. Bart Hester, R-Cave Springs, which would allow a person to be charged with a Class D felony if he or she is arrested for delivery of a controlled substance and already has four or more prior convictions for delivery of a controlled substance. Currently, the person can only be charged with a Class A misdemeanor.

The bill passed 35-0 and goes to the House.

- SB 781 by Sen. Cecile Bledsoe, R-Rogers, which deals with who can inherit property if one spouse murders the other and there is no will. Under the bill, the children of a person convicted of murdering a spouse would be prohibited from inheriting anything from the deceased if they are not blood relatives of the deceased.

The bill passed 35-0 and goes to the House.

- HB 1250 by Rep. David Whitaker, D-Fayetteville, 35-0. It would expand the definition of battery in the second degree to include recklessly causing physical injury to another person while driving while intoxicated. The bill goes to the governor.

Elsewhere Thursday, the House Judiciary Committee gave a “do pass” recommendation to SB 417 by Sen. Jim Hendren, R-Gravette, which would allow criminal prosecution for anyone who harms an unborn child from conception to birth. The bill goes to the House.

Rapert: School choice law needs right balance - Commentary by Sen. Jason Rapert (Log Cabin Democrat, Conway)

LITTLE ROCK — The Senate Education Committee is putting long hours into making sure that Arkansas’ new school choice law strikes the right balance.

Co-sponsors of the school choice bill want parents to have every opportunity to send their children to the best possible schools in their area, regardless of district boundaries. School choice is good for families, and it also creates competitive incentives for school administrators to improve their schools.

On the other hand, legislators don’t want to create a system that returns Arkansas to the days of segregated schools. With this in mind, the Senate Education Committee is hearing from superintendents, attorneys for parents in school choice lawsuits and the state attorney general’s office. The committee is getting input from parties in the long-running Pulaski County desegregation case.

Five of the eight members of the Education Committee are co-sponsors of Senate Bill 65, the school choice bill. Although the co-sponsors could have already advanced SB 65, they are taking the time in committee to make sure they have heard all sides and addressed as many concerns as possible. The bill has already been amended five times.

The previous Arkansas choice law used race as a basis for denying some students the opportunity to transfer outside of their resident school districts, and it was stricken as unconstitutional by a federal judge last year. The judge’s ruling has been stayed, meaning it has not taken full effect, until it has been appealed.

Some educators want to wait until all appeals of that ruling have been decided, which would likely mean the legislature would not approve a bill this session. However, supporters of SB 65 prefer to be prepared for next school year, rather than do nothing.

Under the bill, the deadline for applying to a non-resident district would be July 1. The school would have 30 days to respond. Students may accept only one transfer per year, and if they changed their minds they would have to wait until the following year to return to their previous school.

Criteria for accepting or rejecting transfer applications could be the receiving schools’ capacity. They are under no obligation to add teachers, staff or classrooms to make room for students who wish to transfer into the district. Priority will be given to siblings.

Districts may not set standards for rejecting applications that include students’ academic achievements or athletic abilities. Nor can the standards include proficiency in speaking English or a student’s disability. Previous disciplinary records may not be used either, although a student’s prior expulsion can be used.

Receiving school districts may not discriminate on the basis of race, gender, religion, ethnicity or national origin.

In related news, the House Education Committee advanced HB 1770, which extends from two to five years the period in which a school district can be in academic or fiscal distress before the state Education Department takes it over.

Also, the House Education Committee advanced HB 1528, which creates an office within the state Education Department specifically to hear applications for new charter schools. The state Board of Education, which is appointed by the governor and which rules on all charter applications now, would only hear appeals if HB 1528 is enacted

School Board Approves City's Proposed Street Paralleling Trail (Southwest Times Record, Fort Smith)

GREENWOOD — A proposed street to run parallel to a planned 1,100-foot city walking trail got a thumbs-up Thursday from the Greenwood School Board.

School Superintendent Kay Headley said the city has asked to include a proposed street from Westwood Avenue to Liberty Drive on its city street plan. Headley said the street would be parallel to Greenwood's citywide walking trail, which has been under construction for several years.

She said the trail and the proposed street would pass through the "front yard" of the Westwood Elementary School campus in a place that is pretty low and not a potential building site for the school district. She asked the board to approve not only the school's portion of the trail plan but also the city's street plan.

Without discussion, the board approved the proposal 6-0.

Headley said, "I wish we had that street there now."

In its November meeting, the school board approved allowing the city an easement for the 1,100-foot-by-10-foot paved portion of the citywide trail that would pass adjacent to Westwood Elementary School.

At that time, Doug Kinslow of the Greenwood Parks Commission said the trail would travel south off Arkansas 10 toward Walmart Supercenter on Liberty Drive, traveling along the sewer easement with some deviation and tying the elementary school and the Walmart neighborhood into the city's trail. From there, he said, the trail heads east toward Denver Street and City Hall, which will tie the trail together, Kinslow said.

Eventually, Kinslow said then, the Parks Commission wants the trail to head in all directions, tying all the school campuses into it.

Farm Bureau announces award winners (Gurdon Times)

Clark County Farm Bureau is proud to announce that two students from the Gurdon School District placed in the Arkansas Farm Bureau Ag in the Classroom Poster and Essay Competition that was held in December. Sixth grade student Claire Capps won third place with her poster and eighth grade student Stephany Quintero won second place with her essay. This is an annual competition held state wide to promote the educational and agricultural benefits of healthy living through farming in the state of Arkansas.

Fountain Lake Fights Bullying with Straight Talk to Students (KARK, Channel 4)

"Four eyes! Four eyes!" the group of teens yell.

Cassidy Blake wouldn't want to be bullied in real life.

"Stop it! Please, just stop!" she pleads with the group.

But Blake is playing the part for a group of middle school students at Fountain Lake's bullying seminar.

"They're asking us why do bullies act like bullies," she said. "They want advice on how to deal with it."

These sixth graders are sitting down for a straight talk about bullying, which in recent months has been the alleged cause of suicide for two Central Arkansas teens.

"How many of you think a form of bullying is making fun of somebody's race?" asked Hot Springs Police Officer Courtney Kizer.

Hands shot up around the room, the group of boys understanding the question, clearly.

"What about the kid, you think he's gay, and you make fun of him. Is that bullying?" she asked, to the answer of nods. "He may be gay. He may not be. But that's not our place to make fun of about it. And let's say you're making comments on Facebook or through text message and he asks you to stop and you continue. Then that's harrassment. You could be arrested for that."

It was clearly far from sugar-coated, when it comes to talk talking about consequences.

"We're not trying to scare them. We're trying to say that it's real and happening every day," Blake said.

It may seem like 12 years old is early for addressing sexuality, skin color, and stereotypes.

"It doesn't stop -- but it does start early," Blake said.

Students, police, and teachers told us you have to start now, because the bullying begins early and often thanks to social media and cell phones.

"The world is a much smaller place these days," said Middle School Counselor Linda Webb. "Especially with social media kids truly carry it with them wherever they go. It's hard to get away from if it ever starts."

These instructors are stressing the seriousness to prevent these kids from becoming suicide statistics.

"You've heard about cases of kids committing suicide because of mean comments on Facebook, haven't you?" Kizer asked. "So next time you think about making a comment or writing something mean about a girl -- you may think it's only one comment. But maybe she comes from a home where everyday her mom tells her she's ugly. She can't get away from it anywhere. And she feels like she has no other choice but suicide."

Blake believes every student has played the role of being bullied.

"Everyone's being bullied or has been bullied before," she said. "We want them to know how to stand up for themselves and others the right way."

She wants them to realize, they don't have to stand in that brutal spotlight alone.

UCA's Gallavan elected president of educators association (Log Cabin Democrat)

A professor at the University of Central Arkansas will serve as the 2013-2014 Association of Teacher Educators president, according to a news release.

Nancy P. Gallavan, professor of Teacher Education at the College of Education, was elected to the position.

The association is an individual membership organization devoted to the improvement of teacher education both for school-based and post-secondary educators. ATE members represent more than 700 colleges and universities, more than 500 major school systems and the majority of state departments of education, according to the release.

Gallavan chose a theme of "Advancing Teacher Education that Matters in Teaching, Learning and Schooling." The theme examines characteristics of success, satisfaction, significance and sustainability.

"Success probes the questions of what is effective and useful; satisfaction examines questions of what brings gratification and reward? Significance investigates questions of what is important and critical; sustainability considers questions of what keeps systems and people going?," Gallavan said in the release.

Gallavan has appointed ATE commissions on classroom assessments and on classroom teachers as associated teacher educators.

She previously served as president of the Southeastern Regional Association of Teacher Educators (SRATE) and as president of the Arkansas Association of Teacher Educators (ArATE).

The 2013 ATE summer conference will be held in Washington, D.C., on Aug. 2-6. The 2014 ATE annual meeting will be held in St. Louis, Mo., on Feb. 15-18.

The Good News-Bad News Story of Education (Remarks by U.S. Secretary Duncan to the National Newspaper Publishers Association at their Black Press Week 2013 conference)

It is a pleasure to talk to the members of the NNPA, who have played such an important role in giving voice to communities whose voices too often go unheard.

One of the most extraordinary opportunities in my job is that I get to visit hallowed ground. I have had the honor of standing in the footsteps of giants who fought and won battles for equal educational opportunity.

During the first term, I had the opportunity to speak at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta where Dr. King preached.

I had the opportunity to march in honor of the 45th anniversary of Bloody Sunday at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, where state troopers beat peaceful protesters because African Americans wanted to secure the right to vote.

I spoke at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. And this fall I spoke at the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site in Topeka, Kansas, the school that Linda Brown attended as a ten-year old in 1953, and that helped launch a civil rights revolution.

Whenever I have the opportunity to help recognize and honor our nation's civil rights heroes, I am struck by the paradox of progress.

As a nation, America has made enormous strides in race relations since Brown v. Board of Education. We meet in the shadow of a White House that few could imagine in our lifetimes. And I am so proud to serve President Obama in his second term in office. I still pinch myself some days—who would have thought any of this was possible just six years ago?

And yet—and yet we all know we still have so far to go to live up to the American dream of providing equal opportunity for all. We are on the journey now, but we are a long, long way from Dr. King's mountain top.

What is the paradox of progress?

Despite dramatic progress in recent decades, the bar for educational success has risen rapidly at the same time—and that makes us doubly aware of just how far we have to go as a nation before all children truly have equal educational opportunities.

In 2013, children of color in America not only confront an achievement gap, they confront what I call an opportunity gap that, too often, is unacceptably wide.

As President Obama said in his second Inaugural address, "We are true to our creed when a little girl born into the bleakest poverty knows that she has the same chance to succeed as anybody else because she is an American, she is free, and she is equal not just in the eyes of God but also in our own."

Many of us dedicate our lives to this urgent, unfinished work, because of our passion for achieving Dr. King's dream. It is what drives us, what gets us out of bed every morning—and what often keeps us awake at night.

In a newsman's terms, you might call the paradox of progress a good news-bad news story.

The good news is that after the Brown decision, school segregation declined dramatically in the South.

The bad news is that our schools today are as segregated as they have been at any time since the death of Dr. King.

The good news is that many more black students today are graduating from high school and enrolling in college than ever before.

The bad news is that black students are still less likely than their peers to receive equal access to top-notch teachers and the college-prep classes they need to succeed in today's globally competitive economy.

The good news is that there are now many more black men in college than in prison.

The bad news is that not enough of those young men are staying in college to get their degree—and far too many of them are losing their lives as a result of gun violence and our unwillingness to do what is necessary to keep our children safe.

I want to talk for a moment about the opportunity gap. And then I want to talk about some of our second-term priorities on the budget and sequestration.

The President's plans to create universal access to high-quality preschool and to reduce gun violence, especially for our school children, are plans that need your support and on which your voices need to be heard.

Let me start with the opportunity gap. The scope of the gap today—and the reasons it persists—is spelled out in the recent report of the Equity and Excellence Commission and in the data we gathered as part of our Civil Rights Data Collection Project.

This opportunity gap is deeply troubling. It is painfully at odds with the American creed—that if you study hard and play by the rules, you get a fair shot at the future, regardless of your zip code, skin color, or the size of your bank account.

Today, nearly 40 percent of black and Hispanic students attend schools where more than 90 percent of students are nonwhite.

Think about that for a moment. The data are clear: A decrease in diversity and an upswing in racial isolation are one reason that the opportunity gap is not ending.

We also know that in a knowledge-based economy, academic rigor matters more than ever in preparing students for college and careers.

Yet today, a student in a school with high-minority enrollment is much less likely to go to a school that offers calculus and physics than a student in a high school with low-minority enrollment. Less than eight percent of students taking AP mathematics or AP science courses today are African American.

What sense does that make—how do unequal opportunities help close the achievement gap? Obviously, they don't—instead they actually perpetuate the gap.

Closing the opportunity gap will require that school resources, talent, and spending be targeted to the children and communities who need help the most.

Simply put, today that doesn't happen. In fact, we are one of the few advanced nations that has this backwards, providing students in better-off schools with access to more teachers and more experienced principals.

There are high schools all across America today where fewer than 60 percent of students graduate on time—we call them dropout factories.

And there are schools all across America where teacher turnover is crippling, where the average teacher has just one or two years of experience.

There are schools where family engagement is minimal. And because of the way we fund schools in America, there is often gross inequalities in per-pupil spending.

Now, it is no secret who attends these struggling schools. We know many of these struggling schools are filled with children of color and low-income students.

The hard truth, the brutal truth, is that in too many places, our education system is falling short of being the engine of mobility, the prized pathway to the middle class. Instead, tragically, these schools often perpetuate inequality and restrict opportunity.

So, what is our vision, what is the goal for closing our opportunity gaps, so that we can then close the achievement gap?

President Obama and I believe that every student should have access to a world-class education. We believe every student must have access to rigorous, college- and career-ready coursework that prepares them to succeed. We believe every student should have an effective teacher.

We believe that schools must be accountable for the needs and performance of all students, and that information must be transparent. We believe schools must work in partnership with families and communities, not in isolation.

And we believe that college must be accessible and affordable for all students who have earned the right to attend college.

Now, we saw some real educational progress in the black community in the administration's first term. But it's not enough. This is no time to rest on our laurels. We must get better, faster than ever before. And that sense of urgency is tangible.

The good news is that by 2010, the on-time graduation rate for black students had risen to 66.1 percent. Two-thirds of black ninth-graders now graduate on time.

That is an increase of almost six percentage points from 2008—and it is probably the highest high school graduation rate for black students in our nation's history.

Because the on-time graduation rate rose from 2008 to 2010, an additional 47,000 black high school students graduated on time. That is 47,000 people with a better chance of getting a good job, owning their own home, and supporting a family.

The bad news is that one-third of black students are still not graduating on-time— and we know those numbers are even higher in many inner-city neighborhoods.

And unlike when I was growing up on the South Side of Chicago, there are no jobs anymore that pay a living wage for high school dropouts. You can't go down to the steel mill or auto parts factory and land a good job today if you drop out of school. In the legal economy, there are no high-wage jobs for a high school dropout .

The same good news-bad news story shows up when we look at high school dropout factories, those schools where fewer than 60 percent of ninth graders graduate four years later.

Since 2008, the number of high school dropout factories has dropped by almost 20 percent, from about 1,750 high schools to roughly 1,425 high schools.

For our families, that means nearly 700,000 fewer teenagers—700,000—are trapped in those high schools today than in 2008. That is a big deal, a big step in the right direction.

The progress that high schools are making today puts the lie to the myths that somehow poverty must be destiny in the classroom, or that black and brown children can't succeed academically.

We're seeing some preliminary but encouraging signs of progress as well in our nation's lowest-performing elementary and secondary schools.

For too long, educators and members of the public often shrugged their shoulders in the face of persistently poor performance in our lowest-achieving schools. Too many school leaders wrote off poor children and children of color.

President Obama and I refuse to accept that fatalism. Both our life experiences working in the community tell us that with supports, opportunities, and guidance, our children can and do achieve at high levels. We just have to meet them half way.

So the administration created a \$5 billion School Improvement Grant program to drive dramatic improvement in our lowest-performing schools.

We invested up to \$6 million per school to turn around 1,300 of the country's lowest-performing schools. And about 45 percent of the students in those turnaround schools are African-American.

For the first time, our country today has a new national movement underway to dramatically change the life chances of hundreds of thousands of students in historically underserved communities.

That movement is led by courageous educators and leaders, parents, and students themselves from across the country. This work is difficult, complex, and controversial. But it is also some of the most important work in education today.

I'm pleased to report that in just the first-year of implementing the school turnaround program, two-thirds of schools showed gains in math, and two-thirds of schools showed gains in reading.

And it is good news that, overwhelmingly, communities chose to improve low-performing schools rather than close them.

Nationwide, the vast majority of school closings are due to decisions made at the local level, because of declining enrollment or fiscal pressures.

I know that school closings can have a real impact on the community. But nationwide, less than 20 of the 1,300 schools in the turnaround program were closed.

Now, for all that progress in our schools, the bad news here is pretty plain, too. One third of the turnaround schools had declines in achievement in the first year of the program. And why should any child be stuck in a chronically, low-performing school, much less hundreds of thousands of students?

Why should any child attend a high school dropout factory—or be stuck in one of the nation's 1,400-plus dropout factories? We must get that number down to zero as fast as possible.

Finally, here is the good news and the bad news about college.

The good news is that black enrollment in college went up by about 15 percent from the fall of 2008 to the fall of 2011. Nearly 400,000 more black students are in college today than when the President took office.

The bad news is that black enrollment was essentially flat between 2010 and 2011. And enrollment is not increasing nearly as fast as it should.

Hispanics are increasing their ranks in college faster than black students, both in percentage terms and in numbers. I want to see both black and Hispanic enrollment in college increase even more dramatically. And I want to see many more students of color persist to earn their degrees. The goal is not to go to college—the goal is to graduate, to get that diploma.

So, moving forward, what as a nation are we going to do about the opportunity gap? President Obama and I believe that all levels of government need to invest and invest wisely to help close the gap.

Now, some national leaders, like Republican congressman Paul Ryan, have taken the position that in tight economic times, it's necessary to disinvest in education.

I absolutely disagree. I don't see how the answer to the opportunity gap can be to cut early childhood education or to freeze Pell Grant scholarships for ten years for low-income students.

In his State of the Union, President Obama called for "smarter government." Under the across-the-board cuts of sequestration, we are going to have to implement indiscriminate, automatic cuts to education programs.

Unfortunately, instead of smarter government, we are seeing dumber government at its finest.

Sequestration would cut Title I, which serves our nation's poorest students, by \$725 million.

That blanket cut could affect 1.2 million children—and would require states and districts to cover the costs of about 10,000 teachers and aides.

And who thinks it is a good idea to implement cuts to Head Start that would require providers to make hard choices about how to cover what amounts to the dollar equivalent of cutting 70,000 children out of the program?

Cutting programs for our most vulnerable children is economically foolish and morally indefensible. And it is mind-boggling to me that folks here in Washington have manufactured a crisis, when educators, parents, students, and communities are facing so many real challenges every day in times that are already tough.

I don't need to remind you that these budget cuts were not caused by a hurricane or natural disaster. This is a man-made mess.

And it can be fixed by men and women in Congress—if they act with courage, commitment, and a willingness to compromise. They can be fixed by lawmakers who come to the table to do the right thing, to keep growing the middle class, to strengthen educational opportunity, and to keep good jobs in this country.

Frankly, this is not rocket science—this is not an intellectually difficult challenge.

Now, public officials should always scrutinize education programs carefully for effectiveness. We should always seek smarter government. But education is not just another expense on a budget line—it's an investment in the future.

I believe that high-quality early learning is the best educational investment we can make in our children, our communities, and our country.

And that's why I am thrilled about President Obama's plan to create a new partnership with states to provide universal access to high-quality preschool for all four year-olds.

The President's plan is a landmark proposal. It would provide the largest expansion of educational opportunity in America in the twenty-first century.

Parents who hunger for affordable, high-quality early learning programs, teachers who work tirelessly to provide children with opportunities, and business leaders who seek well-prepared workers all want to see the President's vision recognized.

The biggest beneficiaries of all would be our children—particularly disadvantaged children, English language learners, and children with disabilities.

The bottom line is that dramatically expanding high-quality early learning is a win-win proposition for all. It would make America more productive, more competitive, and save untold millions in taxpayer dollars.

America can't win the race for the future by cheating children at the starting line. And it's past time that we get our public schools out of the catch-up business. We have to level the playing field before children enter kindergarten.

The President's plan would create a new federal-state partnership to enable states to provide universal, high-quality preschool for four-year olds from low-and moderate-income families, up to 200 percent of the poverty line. And it would provide incentives for states to cover all families who want to send their children to preschool.

The urgent need for greater access to high-quality preschool is not really in dispute today. Just ask a parent or a kindergarten teacher if there are gaps in learning when a child walks through that kindergarten door.

We know that, on average, children from low-income families start kindergarten 12 to 14 months behind their peers in language development and pre-reading.

And we know that fewer than 30 percent of four-year olds today—less than three in ten—are enrolled in high-quality preschool programs.

Under the President's plan, states would be required to meet quality benchmarks linked to better outcomes for children—like having high-quality state-level standards for early learning; qualified and well-compensated teachers in all preschool classrooms; and a plan to implement comprehensive assessment and data systems.

I want to be very clear that this has to be not only about expanding access to preschool but about boosting quality. Black children are more likely than other children to be enrolled in full-day preschool program—40 percent of black children ages three to five are in full-day programs.

So, we need to not only expand beyond that 40 percent of black children in programs but make sure that every child is in a high-quality program. Six hours of bad preschool, of babysitting, doesn't help children to develop academically or socially or prepare them to succeed in school.

Of course, it's absolutely fair in an era of tight budgets that we ask ourselves, what is the smartest use of our education dollars?

As President Obama has said, "if you are looking for a good bang for your educational buck," high-quality preschool is the place to look. The best early-learning programs provide life-transforming opportunities for children.

In the near-term, high-quality preschool reduces placements in special education. It reduces grade retention. It boosts graduation rates.

And in the long-term, high-quality preschool both increases the odds of holding a job and decreases crime and teen pregnancy.

Rigorous, longitudinal studies of both the Perry Preschool Project and the Chicago Child Parent Centers have projected a return of seven dollars for every one dollar of investment in high-quality preschool programs. It is the right thing for children, it is the right thing for education, and it is the right thing for taxpayers.

So I would challenge the deficit zealots and ask, how can we afford not to invest more heavily in high-quality preschool?

In closing, I want to talk for a minute about gun violence and school safety. This issue is very personal to me. Frankly, it's something that haunted me from the time I was a little boy, growing up on the South Side of Chicago.

I grew up playing basketball on the streets in many of Chicago's inner-city communities. I had older teenagers who looked out for me and who helped protect me. Far too many of them ended up being shot and killed. And when you grow up and see your mentors and role models dying, that both shapes and scars you in ways that are difficult to articulate.

After I went off to college in 1984, Benji Wilson—who was then the number one high school player in the country—was shot and killed outside his high school.

Years later, when I came back to Chicago to run an after-school tutoring program and an "I Have a Dream" program for a class of sixth graders, one of my first memories was of one of our young men, Terriance Wright, whose teenage brother was shot one afternoon.

Going to that funeral, and trying to help that family through that process, was brutal. We have far too many parents burying their children—that is not the natural order of life.

When I led the Chicago Public Schools, we lost one child due to gun violence every two weeks. That is a staggering rate of loss.

In Chicago, we took steps that no public school system should ever have to take. We created burial funds for families that couldn't afford to bury their children. We raised money to reward tipsters who would help identify shooters.

When I moved to DC four years ago, I thought it couldn't get any worse. Unfortunately, it has. Back home in Chicago, just this week, a six-month old girl was killed after being shot five times. What do you write on her tombstone? As a people, who have we become?

I refuse to accept the status quo. I have two simple goals for change that I think and I hope everyone can agree on: First, many fewer of our nation's children should die from gun violence; and second, many more children can grow up free from a life of fear.

If we refuse to act now, if we refuse to show courage and collective will in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook massacre, I think we will never act.

Sometimes the time picks you; sometimes you pick the time. Today, sadly, the time has picked us. If we don't move forward now in a thoughtful way to protect our babies, then we as adults, as parents, as community leaders have broken a sacred trust with children to nurture them and keep them safe from harm.

In the coming months, I hope you will make your voices heard in your community and on Capitol Hill.

I hope you will work together with the nation's responsible gun owners—including police officers and members of the clergy and the business community—to enact the common-sense restrictions that President Obama has proposed on the sale of assault weapons and high-capacity magazines.

I hope you will join in the fight to expand background checks and close the gun show loophole. For if there is even one step we can take to prevent a child from dying unnecessarily, we must take it.

Let me tell one last story. On my wall in my office in Chicago, I kept a picture that one of our teenagers had drawn for me.

It was a picture of him as a fireman. And the caption that he wrote to go along with it was: "If I grow up, I want to be a fireman."

That's a deep statement about the reality of this young man's world. Think about what this means for so many of our young kids today, who think about "if I grow up." If, not when.

If you are just trying to survive, if you are living with that level of fear every single day, what does that do to your ability to think long-term?

Everything—everything—we are preaching to young people about going to college, building careers, deferring gratification, and planning for the future, it is all undermined when a child is afraid they will get caught up in the craziness of gun violence.

We need all of our children, whether it is in Newtown, Connecticut or the South Side of Chicago, or Aurora, Colorado to think of themselves in terms of "when I grow up."

And when children do have that confidence, our opportunity gaps, our achievement gaps, will shrink.

When that day comes, education will fulfill its role in America as the great equalizer. It will truly be the one force that overcomes differences in race, privilege, and national origin.

The need is urgent. Our children and our country cannot wait.

Thank you for the difference you make, individually and collectively, in strengthening our communities. And I would only challenge all of us to redouble our efforts to make America live up to its promise of equality and opportunity for all of our children.

Supporters of Weiner High School turn to Legislature (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

WEINER — Supporters of a northeastern Arkansas high school are holding out hope that the Legislature passes a bill that would stop the closure of the school this summer.

According to The Jonesboro Sun, about 100 people gathered Thursday to support Weiner High School. On Monday, the state Board of Education voted to close the high school July 1 and send students to Harrisburg High School.

The Weiner district was consolidated with Harrisburg in 2010 after its enrollment dropped below 350 students.

Backers of the school say they're hopeful the Legislature will pass a bill that would suspend any administrative reorganization of school districts until at least April 2015. The bill by Rep. Randy Alexander, R-Springdale, would be retroactive from Jan. 1, so it would cover Weiner High School.

Eureka Springs native is National Merit finalist (Lovely County Citizen)

Clear Spring School is proud to announce that former student Wilson Guillory has advanced to finalist standing in the National Merit Scholarship Program for 2013.

Wilson attended Clear Spring School through 10th grade and now attends the Arkansas School for Math, Sciences and the Arts.

He is the son of Daren and Jessica Guillory of Eureka Springs.

The National Merit Scholarship Program is a non-profit organization that works to identify and honor academically talented U.S. high school students and provide efficient scholarship program management for organizations that wish to sponsor college undergraduate scholarships.

Wilson has advanced to the finalist stage based upon his SAT scores, teacher recommendations and overall achievement.

All National Merit Scholarship winners will be selected from this nationwide group of approximately 15,000 finalists. Merit Scholar designees are selected on the basis of their skills, accomplishments, and potential for success in rigorous college studies.

Wilson also recently won four awards for his science experiment, Evaluating Sea Urchins as Bioindicators, including two first-place regional awards in the field of Animal Sciences, Regional Winner of the U.S. Stockholm Junior Water Prize, and the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration's Taking the Pulse of the Planet Award.

His project now competes on the state science fair level and also continues nationally with the Stockholm Junior Water Prize.